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C O N F I D E N T I A L STATE 129709

FOR HOLBROOKE ONLY

FOLLOWING REPEAT MANILA 08327 ACTION SECSTATE MAY 19

QUOTE C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 08327

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, SHUM, RP

SUBJECT: LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS: COMELEC CHANGES CEBU

- RESULTS TO PUSYON BISAYA SWEEP

REF: MANILA 7873

1. SUMMARY: IN A SURPRISE MOVE MAY 17, COMELEC CHANGED ITS PREVIOUS OFFICIAL ELECTION RESULTS FOR THE CEBU REGION AND DECLARED ALL 13 "OPPOSITION" PUSYON BISAYA CANDIDATES TO BE WINNERS. PRESIDENT MARCOS APPARENTLY PERSONALLY ORDERED THE REVISION. THE LOCAL MEDIA HAD FANNED THE CONTROVERSY WITH RATHER FULL COVERAGE OF THE MANEUVERINGS AND CRITICAL COMMENTARIES ON COMELEC'S BEHAVIOR. WE SEE THE NEW DECISION AS DESIGNED TO IMPROVE THE CREDIBILITY OF THE RECENT ELECTIONS COUNTRYWIDE WHILE UNDERMINING THE CORRUPT CEBU POLITICAL OLIGARCHY. END SUMMARY.

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2. THE COMMISSION ON ELECTIONS REVERSED ITSELF MAY 17 AND PROCLAIMED ALL 13 "OPPOSITION" PUSYON BISAYA PARTY CANDIDATES WINNERS IN REGION VII INTERIM LEGISLATURE ELECTIONS. COMELEC THUS OVERRULED THE OFFICIAL PROCLAMATION OF MAY 13 BY ITS OWN REGIONAL BOARD OF CANVASSERS, WHICH HAD ANNOUNCED THAT NINE PB AND FOUR GOVERNMENT KBL CANDIDATES HAD WON. (THOSE RESULTS HAD BEEN FORETOLD

EARLIER BY COMMISSIONER YANEZA, EXCEPT THAT DURANO SON-IN-LAW EMERITO CALDERON REPLACED TONY CUENCO -- SEE REFTEL.) COMELEC REPORTED IT HAD REVIEWED THE REGIONAL BOARD'S RESULTS AND HAD FOUND "A NUMBER OF VERY SERIOUS ERRORS AND MISTAKES" AND RESULTS WHICH WERE "STATISTICALLY IMPROBABLE." THE FIVE-MEMBER COMMISSION THUS APPOINTED ITSELF AS THE BOARD OF CANVASSERS FOR REGION VII AND ANNOUNCED THE NEW OUTCOME. ACCORDING TO COMMISSIONER MADARANG, IT WAS PRESIDENT MARCOS HIMSELF WHO ORDERED COMELEC TO REVIEW THE EARLIER RESULTS AND CORRECT THE ERRORS, AND HE SHOULD GET THE CREDIT FOR THIS "VICTORY OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES." MADARANG PERSONALLY FORMED AND BACKED THE PB AS A SPRINGBOARD FOR HIS OWN REENTRY INTO CEBU POLITICS; HIS AND YENEZA'S TERM EXPIRED MAY 17.

3. OFFICIAL MANILA WAS SOMEWHAT STUNNED BY THE DECISION, AND FEW HAVE BEEN WILLING TO HAZARD AN INTERPRETATION. MOST SOURCES DESCRIBE IT AS A PLUS FOR THE CREDIBILITY OF THE ELECTIONS AND FOR MARCOS IMAGE AS A DGIGARMINDED LEADER, AS WELL AS A STRONG SLAP AT COMELEC. AT A USAID RECEPTION MAY 17, GOP SOLICITOR GENERAL MENDOZA COMMENTED THAT, AS SOON AS HE HEARD THE DECISION, HE RUSHED TO THE PRESIDENT AND PLEADED NOT TO BE ASSIGNED TO DEFEND COMELEC IN COURT. EX-VICE PRESIDENT EMMANUEL PELAEZ TOLD EMBOFF ONE OF THE LOSING KBL CANDIDATES (PROBABLY GULLAS) HAD FRANTICALLY CONTACTED HIM FOR ADVICE, WHICH WAS "LIE LOW
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AND DON'T DO ANYTHING JUST NOW." INTEGRATED BAR NATIONAL PRESIDENT MARCELO FERNAN, A CEBU LAWYER AND SOMETIME POLITICIAN, SAW THE DECISION AS A PRESIDENTIAL MOVE TO DEMOLISH THE CEBU OLIGARCHY. HE NOTED THAT MARCOS HAD TOLD KBL CANDIDATES MONTHS AGO THAT ANY LOCAL OFFICIAL WHO RAN AND LOST WOULD LOSE HIS JOB; THIS WOULD AFFECT AT LEAST CEBU GOVERNOR GULLAS AND PROVINCIAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT RAMONITO DURANO, PAVING THE WAY FOR A NEW LOCAL LEADERSHIP BEHOLDEN EXCLUSIVELY TO MARCOS. FERNAN ADDED THAT "DAILY EXPRESS" COLUMNIST DOROY VALENCIA HAD PRIVATELY CLAIMED CREDIT FOR THE REVERSAL EARLIER IN THE DAY.

4. MANILA'S TWO DAILY COLUMNISTS WITH REPUTATIONS FOR HAVING "INSIDE INFORMATION" -- VALENCIA AND "BULLETIN TODAY'S" JESS BIGORNIA -- REPEATEDLY DENOUNCED COMELEC'S LONG DELAYS IN ANNOUNCING RESULTS, ARGUING THAT IT SMELLED OF SMOKE-FILLED ROOMS AND POLITICAL DEALS. AFTER THE 9-4 RESULTS WERE ANNOUNCED, VALENCIA COMPLAINED: "THE TROUBLE WITH THE PROCLAMATION OF 9 PUSYON BISAYA AND 4 KBL WINNERS IN THE CENTRAL VISAYAN ELECTIONS IS NOT THE PROPORTION OR SIMPLY WHO WON AND WHO LOST. IT'S TO EXPLAIN HOW THE RESULTS WERE ARRIVED AT. ... PRESIDENT MARCOS HAD NO HAND

IN THE DECISION ON WHO WOULD WIN AND WHO WOULD LOSE BUT HE IS PERHAPS THE WORST VICTIM OF THE HAPPENING. THE CLEAR PUSYON BISAYA MANDATE IN CENTRAL VISAYAS IS NOT A VOTE AGAINST THE PRESIDENT BUT MORE AGAINST THE LOCAL KBL CANDIDATES AND LEADERS. OR PERHAPS, THE ONLY WAY THE PEOPLE OF THE REGION COULD EXPRESS THEIR DISAPPOINTMENT AT THE WAY THEY HAVE BEEN NEGLECTED BY THE GOVERNMENT." BIGORNIA ADDED: "VOTERS CLAIM THEIR WILL HAS BEEN SUBVERTED. THEY DEMAND PUNISHMENT FOR THE PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SLEIGHT-OF-HAND THAT HAS SUDDENLY CATAPULTED LOSERS TO THE TOP OF THE LIST OF WINNERS."

5. REACTING TO THE NEW 13-0 RESULTS, VALENCIA CARPED:
"THE WAY THE COMELEC HANDLED THE CENTRAL VISAYAN ELECTIONS
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AFTER THE BALLOTING WAS OVER IS A CLASSIC IN TOTAL DISREGARD FOR LAWS. THE VIOLATORS HAPPEN TO BE PEOPLE WHO SWEAR BY THE NEW SOCIETY TOO." BIGORNIA, AFTER CREDITING MARCOS WITH RIGHTING THE WRONG, WENT ON: "NO LESS IMPORTANT, IN THE MINDS OF MANY, IS THE ROLE THE NEWS-PAPERS PLAYED IN INFLUENCING THE MINDS OF THE DECISION MAKERS, CHIEFLY PRESIDENT MARCOS. MEDIA EXPOSED NEGOTIATIONS ON THE RESULTS OF THE ELECTIONS IN REGION VII AMONG AGENTS OF CANDIDATES AND OF THE COMMISSION. THE PUSYON HAD A CRUSADING, SOMETIMES ANGRY, CHAMPION IN FELLOW-COLUMNIST TEODORO VALENCIA. FOR THEIR PART, BY JUST MERELY REPORTING ON THE DELIBERATIONS AND RULINGS OF THE COMELEC, BEAT REPORTERS KEPT THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESIDENT INFORMED AND OUTRAGED UNTIL THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF COULD NOT TAKE ANY MORE. THE PHILIPPINE PRESS HAS LONG BEEN A FAVORITE WHIPPING BOY FOR ITS WESTERN COUNTERPARTS. ... WELL, MALACANANG'S DECISION CLEARLY SHOWS THAT EVEN THE ALLEGEDLY DOCILE PHILIPPINE PRESS CAN SPEAK OUT AND BE HEARD."

6. FOLLOWING ARE PORTIONS OF A MAY 18 REPORT BY AMCONSUL CEBU TO THE EMBASSY ANALYZING THE NEW DECISION: QUOTE: SKEPTICISM AND CYNICISM, ALWAYS RAMPANT IN CEBU, WILL FLOURISH EVEN MORE MARKEDLY AS CEBUANOS ATTEMPT TO PUZZLE OUT WHY THE REVERSAL OCCURRED. THEY ARE DEFINITELY SUSPICIOUS AT THE SUDDEN REVERSAL. INITIAL REACTIONS SEEM IN AGREEMENT THAT:

- -- THE HANDLING OF THE REGION VII ELECTION WAS THE GOVERNMENT'S WORST MISTAKE IN RECENT YEARS;
- -- COMELEC IS THOROUGHLY DISCREDITED;

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- -- FORMER CONGRESSMAN RAMON DURANO SUFFERED A MAJOR, PERHAPS TERMINAL BLOW, POLITICALLY (3 OF THE 4 KBL TEMPORARY WINNERS WERE IDENTIFIED WITH DURANO);
- -- GOVERNOR GULLAS, GENERALLY ACCEPTED AS A "NICE GUY," HAS BEEN CRUELLY EMBARRASSED.

REASONS FOR THE COMELEC REVERSAL ARE NOT KNOWN HERE. THE REACTION TO THE MAY 13TH PROCLAMATION WAS INTENSELY CRITICAL, HOWEVER, AND THERE IS SOME SPECULATION THAT PERHAPS THE NEGATIVE REACTION WAS BROUGHT HOME TO PRESIDENT MARCOS ON HIS RECENT VISIT TO THE VISAYAS, DURING WHICH HE POINTEDLY SKIPPED CEBU. HE MAY HAVE GOTTEN AN INKLING OF THE NEGATIVE REACTION IN REGION VII ON HIS VISIT TO BACOLOD.

(AMCONSUL CEBU) COMMENT: A COUPLE OF POSSIBILITIES, PURELY SPECULATIVE, ARISE:

- A. STUPIDITY -- THE INITIAL PROCLAMATION WAS A GROSS MISTAKE BY PEOPLE WHO UNDERESTIMATED THE INTENSITY OF POPULAR REACTION, AND THE REVERSAL WAS A CRUDE ATTEMPT TO CORRECT IT.
- B. A CONSPIRACY BY MARCOS MEN TO HAMMER THE FINAL NAIL IN THE COFFIN OF REGION VII'S OLD POLITICAL RULING FAMILIES. UNDER THIS THEORY, MARCOS OPTED TO ACCEPT DURANO'S INCREDIBLE THREE CANDIDATES PLUS GULLAS, KNOWING CEBUANOS WOULD NEVER BUY THIS OUTCOME, AND THEN CHOSE TO THOROUGHLY DISCREDIT THEM BY REVERSING THE DECISION AND, IN EFFECT, EXPOSING THEM AS ELECTION CROOKS. THE OLD POLITICAL FAMILIES OF CEBU RETREAT IN A SHAMBLES, AND MARCOS HAS HIS TOKEN PUSYON BISAYAS OPPOSITION, CHASTENED BY THEIR STRUGGLE TO ACHIEVE PROCLAMATION, TO PRESENT TO THE WORLD AS HIS "OPPONENTS" IN THE IBP. UNQUOTE.

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7. EMBASSY COMMENT: WE CONCUR WITH ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF AMCONSUL'S ANALYSIS. FROM A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE, IT SEEMS APPARENT THAT, FOR CREDIBILITY'S SAKE, MARCOS NEEDED TO ALLOW SOME "OPPOSITION" GROUP TO WIN SOMEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY ONCE HE DECIDED NOT TO LET AQUINO AND LABAN WIN IN MANILA. THUS CEBU WAS CHOSEN FOR KBL'S TOKEN SETBACK. THE PUSYON GROUP GOT LAVISH COVERT SUPPORT FROM THE GOP

AND ALMOST CERTAINLY DID WIN IN THE ACTUAL VOTING. THE
NEGOTIATED 9-4 RESULT IS A TRIBUTE TO THE BACKROOM SKILLS
OF THE LOCAL KBL MANAGERS -- SOME OF THE BEST MANIPULATORS
IN THE BUSINESS. BUT APPARENTLY MARCOS FINALLY CONCLUDED
THAT A TOTAL "OPPOSITION" SWEEP WAS ESSENTIAL TO SALVAGE
THE CREDIBILITY OF THE ELECTIONS IN CEBU AND COUNTRYWIDE.
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